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AUTHOR Banas, Jeanne; Czyz, Linda; Dussias, Meg; Wojcik, Brenda
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ABSTRACT

This report describes a plan to increase word recognition skills. The targeted population consists of first, second, and fourth grade students in upper middle, middle, and lower socioeconomic communities located in the suburbs outside of a large city. The problem of inadequate word recognition skills was documented through data revealing the number of students who received low scores on Curriculum Based Measurement, S.T.A.R. tests, running records, reading unit tests, and unit word list tests. Analysis of probable causes revealed that student's lack of reading readiness, phonemic awareness, word recognition, parental involvement, and low test scores were related to limited word recognition skills. Many of these probable causes were identified by parent surveys, student checklists, teacher observation, and anecdotal records. A review of possible solutions strategies found through an extensive review of educational journals resulted in the selection of four interventions: Cunningham's Four Blocks (1999), daily phonemic activities, immersion in a print rich environment, and increased parental involvement. Post intervention data indicated that the students lacked word recognition skills that enabled them to become better readers. More research is necessary to determine whether improved academic achievement is a result of the intervention. (Contains 36 references and 15 tables of data. Appendixes provide a spelling test, an anecdotal record form, and an anecdotal record and reminder list.) (Author/RS)

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ED 443 104

IMPROVING READING THROUGH THE USE OF SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

Jeanne Banas

Linda Czyz

Meg Dussias

Brenda Wojcik

An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching and Leadership

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This project was approved by

Amy S. Hanson Ph.D
Advisor

Nancy Stephens, Ma
Advisor

Beverly Gudley
Dean, School of Education

DEDICATION

We dedicate this Action Research Project to all of our students who made it possible for us to attain our goal.

Reach high, for stars lie hidden
in your soul,
Dream deep for every dream
precedes the goal.

-Vsull Starr

ABSTRACT

This report describes a plan to increase word recognition skills. The targeted population consists of first, second, and fourth grade students in upper middle, middle, and lower socioeconomic communities located in the suburbs outside of a large city. The problem of inadequate word recognition skills was documented through data revealing the number of students who received low scores on Curriculum Based Measurement, S.T.A.R. tests, running records, reading unit tests, and unit word list tests.

Analysis of probable causes revealed that student's lack of reading readiness, phonemic awareness, word recognition, parental involvement, and low test scores were related to limited word recognition skills. Many of these probable causes were identified by parent surveys, student checklists, teacher observation, and anecdotal records.

A review of possible solutions strategies found through an extensive review of educational journals resulted in the selection of four interventions: Cunningham's Four Blocks (1999), daily phonemic activities, immersion in a print rich environment, and increased parental involvement.

Post intervention data indicated that the students lacked word recognition skills that enabled them to become better readers. More research is necessary to determine whether improved academic achievement is a result of the intervention.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

The students of the targeted first, second, and fourth grade classes lack word recognition skills that enable them to become fluent readers. Evidence for the existence of the problem includes, criterion based measurement (CBM), S.T.A.R. Test, and the Morris Inventory Spelling Test.

Immediate Problem Context

This research was conducted in four elementary schools in two different districts. Both districts are suburban districts located northwest of a metropolitan area. Schools will be noted as Sites A, B, C, and D. All demographic information came from each district's 1997-1998 school report cards and the 1997-1998 local census.

Site A, a first grade classroom consisting of 25 students, is located in a building of approximately 440 students. There are 17 classrooms and one mobile trailer due to overcrowding. On staff there is one principal, an assistant to the principal, full-time nurse's aide, two secretaries, 17 kindergarten through fifth grade teachers, and four Potentially English Proficient (PEP) teachers. Certified resource staff consists of reading resource, learning disability (LD), at-risk, talented and gifted (TDP), math resource, a part-time speech therapist, part-time social worker,

and psychologist. Site A houses a fine arts classroom, full sized gym, and three large computer labs with a separate library.

Site B, a second grade classroom of 17 students, is in a renovated air conditioned building of 550 students. The administrative staff consists of a principal, assistant principal, secretary, assistant secretary, and 18 kindergarten through fifth grade teachers. In addition, Site B houses a special education program utilizing five special education teachers with ten program assistants. A full sized gym, music room, LMC with two Mac computer labs, and media production room are included in the building. Certified resource staff consists of learning disability (LD), math and reading resource, talented and gifted (TDP), a part-time social worker and psychologist, two part-time speech therapists, and a library media director with three assistants.

Site C, a fourth grade classroom consisting of 25 students, is located in a 36 year old facility with approximately 450 students. The full-time staff consists of a principal, an assistant to the principal, secretary, assistant secretary, 20 kindergarten through fifth grade teachers, three Potentially English Proficient (PEP) teachers, a computer director with three assistants, reading specialist, gifted teacher, math clinician, physical education teacher, and a music teacher. Part-time staff consists of an art teacher, fine arts teacher, speech teacher, social worker, psychologist, and a learning disability and behavior disability (LD/BD) teacher. Site C has a full sized gym, music room, and a learning media center (LMC).

Site D, a second grade classroom of 22 students, is located in a four year old facility with 590 students. There are 34 kindergarten through fifth grade teachers, a principal, and 28 support personnel. This includes the day care staff, one secretary, an assistant secretary, two nurses, library and technology assistants, and special education aides. Students are instructed in the areas of art, physical education, and music. There is also support given in the areas of learning disabilities, speech and language, gifted, and reading.

Students at all sites are predominantly white. Site C houses a fairly large number of Hispanic students. However, the largest percentage of Hispanic students attend Site A. Site A and C house the PEP (bilingual) programs which account for a higher percentage of ethnic diversity (see Table 1).

Table 1

Racial Ethnic Background

Site	White	Black	Hisp.	Asian	Native American
A	59.0%	.6%	37.1%	2.4%	0.0%
B	82.3%	4.6%	8.2%	4.4%	0.4%
C	81.8%	2.2%	13.1%	2.9%	0.0%
D	91.4%	0.3%	3.6%	4.7%	0.0%

Site A has the highest percentage of low income students and also the highest percentage of Potentially English Proficient students. This is due in part to the large number of Hispanic

students (see Table 2).

All sites have a similarly high percentage of student attendance (see Table 3). Site A and B have more student mobility due to large numbers of students living in trailer parks. A high percentage of families living in the trailer parks tend to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Because of their lower incomes and educational backgrounds, families relocate frequently due to employment opportunities. These families tend to move as their economics shift on a monthly basis.

Table 2

Low Income and Limited-English-Proficient

Site	Low Income	Limited-English-Proficient
A	28.2%	31.5%
B	15.7%	0.0%
C	8.0%	0.0%
D	0.8%	4.2%

Table 3

Attendance, Mobility, and Chronic Truancy

Site	Attendance	Mobility	Chronic Truancy	#of Chronic Truants
A	94.6%	23.5%	0.0%	0
B	95.3%	13.8%	0.0%	0
C	95.7%	7.5%	0.0%	0
D	95.7%	5.0%	0.0%	0

At all four sites, the average class size is consistent with the districts' philosophy of maintaining smaller class sizes at the primary levels (see Table 4).

Table 4

Average Class Size

Site	Kindergarten	Grade 1	Grade 3
A	23.3	22.5	24.3
B	16.0	17.5	20.8
C	22.3	22.3	20.7
D	22.2	20.6	21.3

The elementary schools A, B, C,and D are part of consolidated school districts located in communities in part of a mid-western state.

The Surrounding Community

District 1, which is made up of sites A, B, and C, is a suburban community located approximately 25 miles northwest of a large city. Within the community there are both residential and industrial properties. The community is known for low property taxes. It is a much appreciated byproduct of the industrial park where 33,200 firms do business. There are two major shopping centers with restaurants, shops, and a movie theater.

The population, according to the 1998 census, is 23,143 with 100% of the people living in an urban environment. District 1 is a middle class community which benefit from a high rate of

employment and purchased homes. The median per capita income is $70,113 per household according to most recent figures. The median value of an owner occupied house is $186,699.

School revenues come from a large industrial tax base. This is due to the fact that most commercial and business areas are located within the district.

The district educates children at the prekindergarten through eighth grade level in 13 schools. It covers 24 square miles and serves a population of approximately 75,000.

During the period of 1947-1971, student population increased dramatically, reaching a peak enrollment of 11,398. This period of growth was followed by a gradual decrease in enrollment. In 1988, as a result of changes in population, eight schools closed. Since that time, the number of students enrolled has increased to approximately 6,500 students.

The student body represents a cultural richness and diversity which complements the district's instructional programs. Every attempt is made to provide class sizes that average in the mid to lower 20's.

In reading at the elementary level, the district is in the third year of implementing a new reading/language arts program. A revised writing/grammar program in grades K through 8 is in the second year of implementation. A district task force was established to examine student reading achievement. The task force recommendations began implementation during the 1998-99 school year. These recommendations focus on better preparation of students, ongoing staff inservice programs, increased parent awareness through involvement and training, and the expansion of accelerated reading activities.

During the 1998-99 school year, additional staff was provided to selected schools to address needs identified in the reading area. These schools developed an action plan and were provided additional resources to implement their plan.

District 2, in which site D is located, is a suburban community located approximately 22 miles northwest of a large city. It is a residential community with some light industry, several office park complexes, and a major shopping center that provides numerous jobs for the residents. Many community members commute to work using a train whose tracks run through the center of town.

The population, according to the 1998 census, is 53,169 with 100% of the people living in an urban environment. District 2 is an upper middle class community which benefits from a high rate of employment and single family owned homes. The median per capita income is $61,084 per household according to most recent figures. The median value of an owner occupied house is $182,145.

The majority of school revenues come from property taxes. This is due to the fact that most commercial and business areas are located outside the district. District 2 is surrounded by quiet streets and single family homes.

District 2 is a kindergarten through fifth grade elementary school. The district operating expenditure per pupil is $7,338. The total enrollment at Site D is 590 students with an average class size of 24. All classrooms are self-contained, like-age, and heterogeneously grouped.

A referendum was passed in 1993 to build two new elementary schools replacing the older facilities. Three elementary schools were combined into two. The third building, that is not being

used for Site D's students, was not demolished. It is being leased to NSSEO (Northwest Suburban Special Education Organization). The district currently consists of two elementary schools and one middle school.

District 2 has recently adopted new math, science, and social science curriculums. They are also in the process of adopting a new reading curriculum which should be in place at the start of the 2000-2001 school year. University of Chicago Math has now replaced Addison-Wesley at all grade levels in the elementary buildings. Harcourt-Brace, the science curriculum, is a completely hands-on science program. The social science program published by Macmillan/McGraw-Hill is being implemented for the first time this year. Houghton-Mifflin is the publisher for both reading and English.

Low income students account for 20.8% of the district. Low income students are families receiving public aid, living in institutions for neglected or delinquent children, being supported in foster homes with public funds, or eligible for bilingual education (see Table 5).

Table 5

Summary 1997-1998 School Year

District	Low Income	PEP Enroll	Att Rate	Mobility Rate
#1*	20.8%	18.2%	95.3	19.4
#2**	1.8%	3.7%	96.0	8.7

* Sites A, B, C

** Site D

The racial composition of the majority of students in Districts 1 and 2 are white. The next highest enrollment consists mainly of Hispanic students. (see Table 6). Teachers at all sites are predominantly white, with the second largest percentage being Hispanic in District 1 (see Table 7).

Table 6

Racial Student Enrollment Summary 1997-1998 school year

District	White	Black	Hisp.	Asian	Nat.Am.
#1*	66.2%	3.4%	18.4%	11.8%	0.4%
#2**	91.6%	0.8%	3.3%	4.2%	0.1%

* Sites A, B, C

** Site D

Table 7

RacialComposition ofTeachers

District	White	Black	Hisp.	Asian	Nat.Am.
1*	91.4%	1.0%	5.1%	2.2%	0.2%
2**	99.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%	0.0%

* Sites A, B, C

** Site D

In District 1, the average teaching experience is 15.9 years. Thirty-three and nine tenths percent of the teachers have bachelor's degrees, 66.1% of teachers have master's and above.

The pupil-teacher ratio in the elementary buildings is 14.2:1 and the pupil administrator ratio is 195.8:1. In District 2, the average teaching experience is 14.8 years. Forty-eight percent have bachelor's degrees, 52% of teachers have master's and above. The pupil-teacher ratio in the elementary buildings is 19.5:1 and the pupil administrator ratio is 225.5:1. The average teacher's salary in District 2 is $47,753. The average administrator's salary is $84,020. Both districts are similar in attendance rate, although District 1 has a higher rate of mobility (see Table 8).

Table 8

Attendance rate

District	Attend.	mobility	Chronic Truancy	# chronic truants
1*	95.3%	19.4%	0.1%	7
2**	96.0%	8.7%	0.0%	0

* Sites A, B, C

** Site D

In District 1, the Illinois Goal Assessment average scores for 1997-1998 in Grade 3 in reading were 299 compared to the state average of 246. In writing, District 1 received an average score of 20.6 as compared to the state of 18.7. In District 2, the Illinois Goal Assessment average scores for 1997-1998 in Grade 3 in reading were 297 compared to the state average of 246. In writing, District 2 received an average score of 21.2 as compared to the state of 18.7.

The skills and strategies of the reading series used in District #1 are organized into five categories. The instructional design is a recursive one. The major strategies and skills are taught across thematic units in a grade level and across grade levels in the program. Children of different ability levels can be provided with developmentally appropriate literature while still working on the same theme.

The emphasis is on the progress students make in applying strategies in increasingly sophisticated contexts. The emphasis is also on students personalizing strategies and transferring them to different contexts, not only other reading contexts, but also other curriculum-area contexts.

In kindergarten through second grade, the five categories in reading are comprehension strategies, vocabulary strategies, phonics, decoding, and print literacy. In writing, there is written expression and conventions of language in the areas of grammar, spelling, and handwriting. Despite implementation of the various reading strategies, reading remains to be a problem area as evidenced through district report cards.

National Context of the Problem

"Dreadful oral reading is a plague upon the literary landscape. Clumsy and awkward oral reading is heard in schools at every grade level as well as at religious services, board meetings, and a variety of other situations. A high level of competence in oral reading is rarely a gift and usually must be gained through guidance and practice" (Dyer & Bain, 1999, p. 538).

Struggling readers need more than effective short-term interventions. They also need effective reading instruction in their regular classroom programs. Excellent classroom programs

cannot always ensure that all children will become proficient readers.

The relationship between phonemic awareness and learning to read is essential. Phonemic awareness is not just another term for phonics. "It is the ability to take words apart, put them back together, and change them" (Cunningham, 1997, p. 30). Recent research suggests that phonemic awareness may be the most important aspect which separates normal and struggling readers (Stanovich, 1994). The critical question is, "How do children become phonemically aware?"

Children's word recognition capability, vocabulary growth, and comprehension development are essential components of a balanced reading program. Reading instruction that focuses on the growth of children's vocabulary results in enhancing their abilities to infer meanings and to better comprehend what they read. According to Daneman (1991), vocabulary is partially an outcome of comprehension skills, and reading comprehension is partially an outcome of vocabulary. They provide a mutual benefit in promoting reading development. As children's vocabulary grows, their ability to comprehend what they read grows as well. Their abilities to learn new words from context increases as their comprehension skills grow. Struggling readers need more than effective short-term interventions; they also need effective reading instruction in their regular classroom programs (Hiebert & Taylor, 1994).

Many teachers feel that teaching struggling readers is one of their greatest challenges. According to Baumann & Duffy (1996),

> A need exists for elementary school classroom teachers to support the growth of struggling readers. A recent national

> survey of elementary school teachers revealed that many were unsure of how to meet the needs of readers who struggle. (p.27)

Students need to be motivated and inspired to want to learn to read. They need to understand the importance of reading as a life skill. Research has indicated a need for interventions to help increase reading abilities (Daneman, 1991). This is consistent with observations at the elementary levels.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM EVIDENCE AND PROBABLE CAUSE

Problem Evidence

Emotional maladjustment and reading disabilities often form a reciprocal relationship in which reading difficulties lead to slight emotional maladjustment. This maladjustment may lead to more severe reading disabilities, which in turn lead to a more severe emotional maladjustment. In most cases, the emotional adjustment of a child improves greatly as his reading skills improve in an excellent diagnostic-prescriptive reading program with a good teacher-pupil relationship (Miller, 1995). A variety of tools have been used to show evidence for the existence of the problem: S.T.A.R./Accelerated Reader Tests, Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM), and Morris Inventory Spelling Test.

S.T.A.R. Test

The diagnostic information as a result of taking this test is a generalized skills assessment in reading. This test allows the researcher to keep track of student's individual reading levels and grade equivalency. The administering of this test is done by having individual students work on a computer to answer Cloze Sentences that are presented with increasing difficulty.

Table 9 shows a high percentage of students that fall in the 25th-49th percentile. This represents the majority of students below grade level achievement in reading.

Table 9

S.T.A.R. Summary Report

Percentile	A	B	C	D
Below 25th	0%	12%	12%	7%
25th-49th	80%	12%	17%	13%
50th-74th	10%	18%	33%	12%
75th-Above	10%	59%	38%	68%

Student achievement needs to be at the 50 percentile or above to be considered on grade level at the beginning of the year. This presents evidence that the problem of low reading achievement exists. Another tool used to identify evidence of lack of word recognition skills is the use of Curriculum Based Measurement Tests (CBM).

Curriculum Based Measurement Tests (CBM)

Curriculum Based measures are three brief selected reading passages taking one minute each to administer. This includes a measure of rate and accuracy in the basic skill area of reading. Local comparisons are made using district norms. CBM's provide an accurate, reliable measure of student achievement and progress in a brief period of time.

While reading, students are asked to read aloud from selected passages in their reading curriculum. Examiners score the number of words read correctly and the number of errors for each passage. Three, one minute passages are administered. Examiners calculate the median score as an indicator of reading achievement. There are

four major benefits of Curriculum Based Measurement. First, CBM's index student performances within the curriculum for ALL students. These tasks indicate what may actually be expected regarding rates of student progress. They also document when students are learning, and allow for changes to occur in general education when learning is not occurring at the pace expected.

The information from Table 10 indicates a wide variety of C.B.M. scores. Sites A and B are composed of a high percentage of students who do not meet the C.B.M. criteria. On the average 47% of students from sites A and B do not meet C.B.M. criteria. The data collected using C.B.M.'s, provides evidence that a substantial percentage of students do not meet the national grade level norms established for this measurement and are not reading on grade level. The next assessment tool used to evaluate students is the Morris Inventory Spelling Test.

Table 10

Curriculum Based Measurement Tests (CBM)

Sites	A	B	C	D
Exceeds	25%	17%	20%	35%
Meets	40%	23%	76%	43%
Does Not Meet	35%	59%	4%	22%

Morris Inventory Spelling Test

The third assessment tool is the Morris Inventory Spelling Test. This tool allows the delineation of a rough developmental sequence that enables teachers to trace the qualitative changes in children's spelling over time. This test, administered verbally

by the teacher, is composed of 18 preselected word with vowel patterns. These 18 words are dictated and then analyzed and placed into four specific categories. These categories are: pre-phonetic, phonetic, vowel transition, and correct.(See Appendix A)

The four sites were given the same list of words regardless of grade level. Site A is a first grade class, Sites B & D are second graders, and site D consists of fourth grade students. The data from Table 11 indicates a lesser degree of difficulty as students progress upward in grade levels. All sites, except for Site A had no students in the Pre-Phonetic stage. This shows that students have acquired the beginning skills needed to build phonemic awareness. At this time of the year, students at Site A have not yet obtained this important skill. Due to teacher observations and anecdotal records (See Appendix B & C), students are unable to recognize high frequency words in reading passages.

Table 11

Morris Inventory Spelling Test

Site	A	B	C	D
Pre-Phonetic	15%	0%	0%	0%
Phonetic	38%	12%	5%	4%
Vowel Transition	42%	29%	7%	13%
Correct	5%	59%	88%	83%

After reviewing evidence gathered from S.T.A.R., CBM's, and the Morris Inventory Spelling Test, the researchers have determined that students are insufficient in various reading skills. All the data collected show a consistent need for improved reading strategies. Students reading ability is negativity affected by inadequate reading readiness, lack of word recognition strategies, poor sight word vocabulary, and inadequate parent involvement.

Probable Cause

Inadequate word recognition skills affect all aspects of learning. According to Miller (1995),

> Emergent literacy states that literacy instruction actually begins at birth and that preschool and kindergarten programs should be a continuation of this instruction. However, children in kindergartens today are often presented with formal, structured reading programs for which they simply are not ready. When a child fails to make adequate progress in reading, he or she usually develops a negative self-concept and a dislike for all reading activities, which makes it even more difficult for him or her to achieve reading success. (p. 5)

Lack of these skills causes deficiencies in phonemic awareness, reading readiness, word recognition strategies, and sight word vocabulary. Finally, inconsistent parent involvement may also be a contributing factor to poor word recognition. The first of the probable causes is lack of phonemic awareness.

Lack of Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is a more potent predictor of reading achievement than nonverbal intelligence, vocabulary, and listening

comprehension (Stanovich, 1994). "It correlates more often with reading acquisition than tests of general intelligence or reading readiness. Most importantly, phonemic awareness tasks are the best predictors of the ease of early reading acquisition, better than anything else that we know of, including IQ" (Stanovich, 1994, p. 284).

"Children who have not yet learned to read have difficulty in analyzing spoken words into phonemes, the smallest units of sound" (Moustafa & Maldonado-Colon, 1999, p. 449). Whole-to-part phonics capitalizes on children's knowledge of language and their ability to recognize words holistically. Beginning reading instruction presents teachers with the challenge of how to involve young children in meaningful and functional reading and writing, while simultaneously teaching the special print skills and knowledge usually associated with phonemic awareness (Poremba & McGee, 1996). "There is substantial evidence that phonemic awareness is strongly related to success in reading and spelling acquisition" (Yopp, 1995, p. 20). Yet, they do not address the question of whether a measure of phonemic awareness truly contributes to the prediction of reading and spelling performance years later (Yopp, 1995). Phonemic awareness is only one cause of inadequate word recognition skills. Another cause is inadequate reading readiness.

Inadequate Reading Readiness

One powerful determinant of what they will learn in a given situation is based on what is already known. According to Lyon (1998),

> In reading, the unique experiences that each child brings to the classroom affect interactions with the text. Limited background knowledge hinders word recognition. To read an

> alphabetic language like English, children must know that written spelling systematically represents spoken sounds. When youngsters figure this out, either on their own or with direct instruction, they have acquired the alphabetic principle. (p. 579)

When people speak to one another, the individual sounds or "phonemes" within the words, are not consciously heard by the listener. No one ever receives any "natural" practice understanding that words are composed of smaller, abstract sound units. For example, when one says the word *bag*, the ear hears only one sound, not all three as in /b/-/a/-/g/. This is because when *bag* is spoken, the /a/ and /g/ phonemes are folded into the initial /b/ sound. Students need to detect the seams in speech, unglue the sounds from one another, and learn which sounds "phonemes" go with which letters (Lyons, 1997). This process ensures rapid, efficient communication. Another cause for lack of word recognition skills is lack of school readiness.Individual sounds are not consciously heard by the listener (Lyon, 1997). "Programmatic research over the past 35 years has not supported the view that reading development reflects a *natural process*. Researchers have established that certain aspects of learning how to read is highly unnatural" (Liberman, 1992, p. 15). "Unlike learning how to speak, beginning readers must appreciate consciously what the symbols stand for in the writing system they learn" (Liberman, 1992, p. 15). If learning to read was natural, there would not exist the substantial number of cultures that have had to develop a written language despite having a rich oral language. If learning to read unfolds naturally, why does our literate society have so many youngsters and adults who are

illiterate with poor sight word vocabulary?

Lack of School Readiness

It has been the experience of the researchers that some children enter school with weaknesses in one or more of the following areas; limited proficiency in English, hearing impairments, and preschool language impairments. Children whose parents had difficulty learning to read, are particularly at risk, and therefore fall behind from the onset. "Few of my students could identify letters of numbers, most have had little book knowledge, none could write their names, and like Ezzie, some had rarely had opportunities to put pencil to paper" (Wagstaff, 1998, p. 298). Another area that needs to be addressed is the area of sight word vocabulary.

Poor Sight Word Vocabulary

Few students are unable to make analogies between familiar and unfamiliar words (Moustafa, 1999). An example of this would be learning to recognize the print words "small" and "smile". Children figure out that *sm-* is pronounced /sm/. Students use their knowledge that *sm-* is pronounced /sm/ when decoding other words with *sm-*. Learning the print words "part" and "cart", children figure out the *-art* is pronounced /art/. They use that knowledge to pronounce *-art* in other words. As a result, once students know how to pronounce *sm-* and *-art*, they can independently pronounce "smart".

Students who are capable decoders often experience difficulty in reading when they encounter too many words for which they have no meaning (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999). Children learn to talk without undue difficulty by listening to those around them. They learn because speech is full of meaning and is used

purposefully. Children must also experience language filled with meaning, if they are to learn how to read and write (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999). Comprehension, concept building, and thinking proceed a child's acquisition of skills. It is only because the text is meaningful that children realize that they are reading and acquiring skills as they work with written language. When they understand the content, they can begin to understand how the bits and pieces, the letters, syllables, words, and sentences work. Ultimately, the unifying factor in language is the content (Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999).

Children's vocabulary knowledge closely reflects their real life experiences. "Not having access to the meaning of words representative of the concepts and content of what they read causes difficulty in children's comprehension of text, limits their ability to make a connection with their existing background knowledge, and inhibits their capacity to make coherent inferences" (Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 1998, p. 337). To comprehend, a reader needs some idea of not only a word's meanings, but also the ways in which the meaning contributes to the cohesiveness of the ideas or information. Without an understanding of context, the word "spring", for example, can refer to a season or a pool of water, and "read" can be pronounced "reed" or "red". Vocabulary knowledge is a critical part of a balanced reading instructional program because it further nurtures children's comprehension development. At the targeted sites, poor sight word vocabulary is evident in vocabulary pretests. It is also apparent in the students' application of writing within the curriculum. Another cause of poor word recognition is inadequate parent involvement.

Inadequate Parent Involvement

Without the interaction of school, home and community, children may not recognize the value of learning. Children are learning all the time: they learn at school, they learn at home, and they learn in the community. All three places of learning are critically important to a student's success. According to Johnson (1986),

> Children want and need to see the relationship between their classroom learning experiences and their life away from school. They benefit greatly from the knowledge that parents, as well as other adults and children, are interested in and supportive of their learning progress. Dysfunctional families provide a negative environment which breeds a low sense of self, which then effects the learning process. (p. 89)

This can be evidenced in teacher observations, student permanent records, and as cited in recent research.

It is wise to be aware of possible causes in order to address the needs of students who are struggling in reading. These elements need to be considered when searching for solution strategies to accommodate these students and help them to learn to apply skills to help them recognize words when reading.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

A review of the literature reveals several solution options for improving word recognition skills. These solutions are four tools that can be implemented in a language arts program to provide desirable reading instruction for all students: Cunningham's Four Blocks Literacy Model, early exposure to print rich environments, support programs, and parent involvement.

Four Blocks Literacy Framework

Cunningham, Hall, and Defee (1990) wanted to figure out how to provide reading instruction to children with a wide range of entering levels without putting them in fixed ability groups. The Four-Blocks framework was developed in 1989-90 in a first-grade classroom. In the 1990-91 school year, 16 first-grade teachers in four schools used the framework, making modifications to suit a variety of different school populations, including a Title 1 school (Hall, Prevatte & Cunningham, 1995). Since 1991, the framework has been used in numerous first, second, and third grade classrooms where children struggle with reading and writing.

The first of the four blocks is Guided Reading. During Guided Reading, each student has a copy of the book being read. The children read the story in a variety of ways such as partner, choral, echo, and silent reading as the week progresses. The

practice of rereading stories for fluency has been advocated for many years (Samuels, 1979). The teacher introduces the story by evaluating and then activating prior knowledge. This helps prepare the students to read the story. It is then followed by a teacher read aloud. The Guided Reading Block also includes the following activities: discussion of plot, characters, and setting, reenactment of story and characters, comprehension questioning, and discussion about words and their sounds. This enables the children to function like a good reader who approaches text strategically and continues to learn how to read by reading (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999).

Self-Selected Reading is part of a balanced literacy program. During this block, children get to choose what they want to read and what parts of their reading they want to respond to. Teachers hold brief, individual conferences with children about their books. At this time, the student will verbally retell the story in their own words. Children read books on their own level from a variety of fiction, nonfiction, picture, and chapter books that the teacher has gathered (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigman, 1999).

The Writing Block is carried out in a "Writers' Workshop" fashion. The teacher presents a mini-lesson in which he or she models *real* writing for the class and a skill or strategy to be emphasized. A mini-lesson focuses on writing a piece, adding on to a piece, or editing a piece. The teacher refers to the Word Wall, which is a display of pre-made high frequency word cards, and other charts in the room to model the use of available resources. The teacher models the use of an Editor's Checklist, a chart which has been developed by the teacher to promote and guide self-checking and peer editing. This chart consists of various grammar

rules that students can use to write correctly. The teacher models and demonstrates her/his thinking by talking aloud as she/he writes. Next, the children start their own writing. Individual editing conferences occur between student and teacher while other students write. It is not uncommon for them to be in different stages of the writing process: finishing a story, starting a new story, editing, and illustrating (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999; Routman, 1995).

The last of the four blocks is the Working With Words Block. In this block, children not only learn to read and spell high frequency words, but also learn the patterns which allow them to decode and spell words. The teacher introduces five Word Wall words per week by having students see the words, say the words, and chant(snap, clap, stomp, cheer) the words. They then write the words and check them together with the teacher. The students then trace around the words and check together with the teacher. On days of the week when the Word Wall words are not the focus, the teacher reviews previous Word Wall words (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999; Yopp, 1995).

The language arts program is divided among the above mentioned four blocks of literacy, each of which gets 30-40 minutes daily (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999). This framework enables all children in first, second, third, and fourth grades to become better readers and writers through systematic, multi method,and multilevel instruction (Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999). In addition to the Four Block Framework, early exposure to print rich environments can be used.

Early Exposure to Print Rich Environments

Some children enter school as natural readers that were taught at home. These children often come from homes that are literature rich where they are sung to, chanted to, talked to, and allowed to explore and foster their curiosity (McCracken & McCracken, 1995).

These children seem to acquire literacy with little instruction at school and usually form the top reading groups. When exposed to "real-world" products, children get an early start in learning how to read from everyday items such as books, newspapers, magazines, recipes, and maps (Cunningham, 1995). The children who don't understand how to read in the "real-world" do not have the same drive and motivation as children who have been exposed to "real-world" ideas. Children may come into first grade knowing how to track print because they were read to at home. Children have also watched people write thank-you letters, grocery lists, etc. (Cunningham, 1995). They have observed the top to bottom, left to right movement of writing. They have typed on computers and have observed various printing styles. Because they have had someone to talk to about reading and writing, they have learned much about the written word. Being exposed to pictures in story books, letters of the alphabet, symbols, and familiar logo graphs, (Coca-Cola or McDonalds), children learn to print letters, know some letter names, write signatures, and pronounce rhyming words (Poremba & McGee, 1996; Clay, 1997; Ehri, 1991; Ferreiro, 1986; Lass, 1982).

Print rich environments, within the classrooms, contain classroom libraries of a variety of literature genre, labeled objects around the room, maps, posters, bulletin boards, and

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newsprint available to the students. It is advantageous for schools to purchase a mix of good literature and predictable text (Honig, 1997). Books that are purchased should be both fiction and non-fiction. Later in life, children learn that the English language is alphabetical. Words do not function just as logo graphs, but are built from a combination of alphabet letters where each letter stands for a sound. Additional resources available to students within the school are various support programs.

Support Programs

Support programs by reading specialists need to be available to students at the onset of their learning (Honig, 1997; Pukulski, 1994). Support programs reinforce skills already introduced in the classroom. These programs allow for some skill grouping because such groups are essential for diagnostic teaching.

Due to the increasing number of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, it is necessary for schools to provide Bilingual Programs for non-English speaking students (Honig, 1997; Canney, Kennedy, Schroeder, & Miles, 1999). "Students with formal schooling in their native language enrolled in a Bilingual program have not fallen behind in cognitive and academic growth during the four to seven years it takes to build academic proficiency in their second language, bilingually schooled students typically sustain their level of academic achievement and out perform monolingual schooled in the upper grades" (Burke, 1999, p. 3).

Struggling readers often receive instruction in the students' regular classroom (Duffy-Hester, 1999; Walmsley & Allington, 1995). Many students who struggle in reading do not qualify for support programs. Due to limited time and space by resource staff,

only the most extreme cases are able to be taken. Support programs are more elective when teacher/student ratio is low. Some school districts lack funding for additional support programs. "Even if struggling readers do receive reading support, the majority of the teacher directed reading time still occurs in the regular classroom reading program" (Duffy-Hester, 1999, p. 481). Support programs zero in on specific skills rather than reading practice. This can be more effective when working within the classroom setting as opposed to pull-out programs. Students then would not miss key concepts that are taught throughout the day. "Finally, children may become "trapped" in a pull-out, special program cycle throughout their entire elementary school years" (Allington & Cunningham, 1996, p. 717). A key component to any successful reading program is having parents actively participating in their child's education.

Parent Involvement

"Children's home environments are the sights of their earliest language learning and have long been recognized as a significant factor in their language development" (Cairney & Munsie, 1995, p. 392). "When parents are welcomed as partners in their child's "educational team", a bridge connecting the child's home and school environments is created, which empowers parents as active participants in their child's literacy development" (Morningstar, 1999, p. 690). Teachers are well aware that when meaningful opportunities to contribute to their child's education arise, parents have the potential for making a difference. According to Ollila & Mayfield (1989),

> Research has shown that the foundation for learning to read begins in the home and is nurtured as the child grows and

> goes to school. This "nurturing" of emergent literacy covers the spectrum from minimal assistance to a rich literacy environment in both home and school.(p. 98)

Inviting parents to bring information about their child's print activities to the classroom helps teachers understand their students as literacy learners (Lazar & Weisberg, 1996). An example of print activities would be stories, pictures, and letters created at home. A parent-teacher partnership needs to be more than just an informational exchange. Parent-teacher partnerships need to exchange information to form a didactic collaboration that focuses on the child's individual needs (Morningstar, 1999). One suggestion is to use home response journals. This concept of partnership recognizes that the child's world includes much more than the time and experiences in school. For some parents, participation in school literacy programs presents an opportunity to have a successful experience with the school system, to develop a stronger commitment to education, and to become more aware of and confident in their role in their child's learning. In addition, effective home-school literacy programs can generate increased parental and community support for education in general and the school in particular (Ollila & Mayfield, 1989).

The improvement of word recognition skills can be attained through the implementation of Cunningham's Four Blocks, exposure to print rich environment, additional support programs within the schools, and active parental involvement. The existing problem stems from the lack of sufficient word recognition skills in students. Our goal is to meet the needs of a variety of children with a wide range of literacy levels while avoiding ability

grouping. One objective is to avoid the pendulum swing by combining the major approaches to reading instruction. New research, ideas, and strategies have provided teachers the numerous tools to attack word recognition.

Project Objective and Processes

As a result of the use of strategies to increase word recognition skills during the period of September, 1999 to January 2000, the students of the targeted first, second and fourth grade classes will increase phonemic awareness and comprehension as measured by the S.T.A.R. Test, Curriculum Based Measurement, unit word list tests, developmental phonics test,and reading unit tests. In order to increase student vocabulary development, the following procedures are necessary:

Project Action Plan

Objective: To implement instruments and procedures to improve word recognition skills in targeted first, second, and fourth grade classrooms during the language arts block of approximately two and a half hours.

I. Phonemic Awareness (September-January)

A. Patricia Cunningham's Four Blocks

- Guided Reading: (30-40 minutes)
- Working with Words: (30 minutes)
- Writing: (40 minutes)
- Self-Selected Reading: (30 minutes)

B. Possible Daily Activities (Starting in September)

- Clap and snap syllables
- Word Wall
- Concept wheel
- Semantic word map
- Webbing
- Learning Centers (recorded books, book games)

- Computer Programs (Reader Rabbit, Storybook Weaver, Writing Center, Jump Start, Spellbound, Bailey's Book House, and Word Munchers)

II. Print Rich Class Environments (Starting in September)

A. Materials

- Magazines and newspapers
- Classroom and school library
- Maps
- Book Bags
- Writing Center
- Recipes
- "Real World" Products
- Interactive bulletin boards
- Charts, graphs, posters
- Published student work
- Poetry
- Pocket charts

III. Parent Involvement

A. Communication

- Parent dialogue journal (Monthly)
- Monthly calendar reading log
- Parent Conferences: (November)
- Student portfolios: (yearly)

IV. Feedback (September-December)

A. Student

- Reading self-evaluation: (September)
- Reading Strategies I: Primary & Intermediate:(September)
- Monthly reading log
- Monthly reading favorite
- Think pair-share: (daily)

B. Teacher

- Continuum of reading growth checklist: (Monthly)
- Observations: (daily)
- Read aloud: (daily)
- Modeling: (daily)

V. On Going Assessment

- Anecdotal records: (once weekly per student)
- Curriculum Based Measurement: (monthly per student)
- Accelerated Reader: (student paced)
- S.T.A.R. Test: Pre & Post Test
- Informal Reading Inventory: Pre, Mid, & Post
- Running Records: (Monthly)
- Unit Word List

Methods of Assessment

For the targeted students the methods of assessments are as follows: Curriculum Based Measurement, S.T.A.R. Test, and the Morris Inventory Spelling Test.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECTS RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The objective of this project was to increase word recognition skills during the period of September, 1999 to January 2000, for the students of the targeted first, second and fourth grade classes. This objective was accomplished through the implementation of the Four Blocks of Literacy Framework by Cunningham and Hall. In addition to this framework, a print rich environment was provided to foster curiosity, the love of learning and literacy. Additional support programs by resource personnel were also available. Finally, the increase of parental involvement was encouraged by providing at home reading activities.

The difficulty that was encountered when assessing students was the lack of endorsement of the S.T.A.R program at all sites. At sites C and D there was inadequate support and interest in the S.T.A.R program at both school and district levels. Teachers at sites A and B received both support and training on the administration of the S.T.A.R. program.

Sites A, B, and C are located within the same district. This district fully supports the implementation of the Four Blocks throughout all of its grade levels. In Site D, however, this is not the case. At times, the implementation of this program was difficult to accomplish while still maintaining the necessary

balance of its endorsed curriculum.

The implementation of Cunningham's Four Blocks of Literacy consisted of Guided Reading, Working with Words, Self-selected Reading, and Writing. In order to increase vocabulary skills, the above four blocks occurred daily. Each block comprised a 45 minute time period within the language arts curriculum.

Next, each site provided a print rich environment by displaying grade level vocabulary and theme based words throughout the classrooms. A variety of multi-level reading material was readily available to the students. Numerous posters and pictures also graced the walls.

Additional reading support was provided daily to a targeted group of struggling readers by resource personnel. This targeted group was comprised of four students which meet daily for thirty minutes. Letters and sounds, Wright group books, and the Direct Instruction Method were used to enhance their learning. For the advanced students, Accelerated Reader and novel studies were implemented.

Teachers used daily book bags to supplement at home reading. These bags contained leveled reading material that were to be enjoyed and shared with family members. Suggested additional activities were also provided for parents and students. The information gathered from each students' tests were tabulated and evaluated.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

An analysis was conducted on the S.T.A.R., C.B.M., and Morris Inventory Spelling Tests. The analysis of the results will be presented.

S.T.A.R. Test

The S.T.A.R. Test was given again in January. The results of this test was compared with the results from the same test given in September. See Table 12.

Although the students' reading levels depict growth, this is not reflected in the post-test data due to the national norms. The existing S.T.A.R. scores are representative of individual student's performance on the test in comparison to a nationally representative sample of students scores acquired in the Spring of 1996. As with any test, it is important to remember that test scores are only a single indicator of a student's performance in school. Additional factors may also influence test scores.

Table 12

S.T.A.R. Comparison for Pre/Post Tests

Percentile	A	B	C	D
	Pre/Post	Pre/Post	Pre/Post	Pre/Post
Below 25th	0%/10%	12%/17%	12%/14%	7%/10%
25th-49th	80%/51%	12%/22%	17%/27%	13%/26%
50th-74th	10%/15%	18%/17%	33%/32%	12%/15%
75th-Above	10%/23%	59%/44%	38%/27%	68%/49%

S.T.A.R. provides both criterion-referenced and norm-referenced scores. It yields more than one frame of reference for describing a student's reading performance. These two pieces of information differ substantially, however, so it is important to understand the two estimates and also their development when making interpretations of the S.T.A.R. results.

The Growth Summary Report shows progress between the two testing sessions. This report is intended to provide information concerning the effectiveness of classroom reading programs and/or materials. See Table 13.

Table 13

S.T.A.R. Growth Summary for Pre/Post Tests

	A	B	C	D
	Pre/Post	Pre/Post	Pre/Post	Pre/Post
GE	1.4/1.8	2.4/2.5	4.0/4.7	2.5/2.7
IRL	PP/.3	1.6/2.2	3.6/4.1	1.8/2.1

The grade equivalent (GE) is a norm referenced score. It provides a comparison of a students' performance with that of his or her peers around the nation. The instructional reading level (IRL) is a criterion referenced score. The IRL provides an estimate of the grade level of written material with which the student can most effectively be taught. While the IRL, like any test result is simply an estimate, it provides a useful indicator of the instructional level of material that would best benefit student. Table 13 indicates that student test scores have improved slightly in each of the above sites during a three month period. Post Tests were also given for the C.B.M.'s.

Curriculum Based Measurement Tests (CBM)

The C.B.M. Tests was given again in January. Pre and Post tests were compared to see if any growth was indicated. See Table 14.

Table 14

Curriculum Based Measurement Tests (CBM) Pre/Post Test

Sites	A	B	C	D
Exceeds	25%/68%	17%/35%	20%/36%	35%41%
Meets	40%/16%	23%/30%	76%/60%	43%/32%
Does Not Meet	35%/16%	59%/35%	4%/4%	22%/27%

Different pre/post tests were administered to each student in September and again in February. Passages were selected from the literature based reading series. Content chosen in the later passages reflected the progression of reading ability at each grade level. At all sites, the percentages increased in the 'exceeds' category. There was also an increase in the 'meets' category, with the exception of Site C and D. At Site C the percentage dropped 16%, however this 16% transferred into the 'exceeds' category. At Site D, however, the percentage was split, with 5% additional in the 'does not meet' category and an increase of 6% in the 'exceeds category. Pre and Post Tests were administered to 90 students at the targeted sites.

Morris Inventory Spelling Test

The Morris Inventory Spelling Test was given again in January. The results of this test was compared with the results from the same test given in September. See Table 15.

Table 15

Morris Inventory Spelling Test Pre/Post

Site	A	B	C	D
Pre-Phonetic	15/0%	0/0%	0/0%	0%/0%
Phonetic	38/16%	12/0%	5/4%	4%/0%
Vowel Transition	42/41%	29/12%	7/8%	13%/9%
Correct	5/43%	59/88%	88/88%	83%/91%

In all of the above mentioned sites there were dramatic improvements documented in the post test. As expected, greater gains were evidenced in Sites A, B, and D due to primary level growth. This inventory is used to assess individual student's knowledge of phonics, consonants, vowels, blends, etc. The acquired information was then used to develop flexible groups allowing children with similar phonetic knowledge to work together on specific skills. The results of Site C depict lesser gains as this is a fourth grade class. The majority of students in this class are already proficient in phonics. The data collected before and after the implementation of the intervention strategies, is a source of information from which many conclusions and recommendations can be drawn and made.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The first essential step in a quality reading program is to diagnose student reading levels. This can be accomplished by administering a pretest that will allow the teacher to identify strengths and weaknesses in the area of reading. As time

progresses, both individual and class improvements can be charted.

Cunningham's Four Blocks of Literacy (1999) was proven to be an effective teaching framework. The Working With Words Block made the most profound difference in the student's learning.Students became more aware of phonemic patterns that enabled them to spell unfamiliar words, including words with irregular spelling patterns, correctly. Evidence of this is present in the increase of individual scores in the Morris Spelling Test. Another successful intervention was the abundance of a print rich environment that enabled students to immerse themselves in a variety of genres while making authentic life applications.

As part of the Self-Selected Reading Block, opportunities were presented for students to read high interest literature of varying difficulties. In addition, each site provided a good model of reading fluency by motivating students through daily teacher read-alouds and book talks. The read-alouds were clear, expressive and enthusiastic and promoted constant dialogue as well. Support programs, in addition to the Four Blocks Method, have impeded accelerated progress with students who verifiably struggle in the early stages of reading. Regardless of how comprehensive or multi-level a program may be, there will always be children who lack the necessary reading strategies to be successful in learning to read.

At Site D, the intervention was successful. However it was not as successful as had been anticipated. This may be due in part to the fact that the district in which this site is located did not endorse the Four Blocks of Literacy as did the district in which the other three sites were located. At times there was much frustration in trying to incorporate the Four Blocks while

still accomplishing what was expected from the required curriculum. This would, therefore, be considered a weakness: the Four Blocks is a specific format that requires a great deal of time to be effective.

At Sites A, B and C, Cunningham's Four Blocks were not only encouraged, but fully supported by both building and district levels. Training and sufficient materials were provided across all grade levels. These interventions were effective, but will not be able to be fully assessed until a later date. There was not sufficient time during this study to fully gauge the results. It is also our belief that this program will be more successful as students are introduced at the kindergarten level with further implementation throughout their elementary years. We predict that this may result in long term gains.

One of the strengths of the program is the repetition that is involved during implementation. It is a known fact that material needs to be repeated before it can be stored in long term memory. This was especially effective with primary students. The Four Blocks revolve around the basics, an area that has often been neglected in recent years. It has a specific format that is user friendly and many manuals to support the ease of its use.

We recommend the implementation of Cunningham's Four Blocks of Literacy to our fellow educators, provided that sufficient time and support is provided. Beginning this program at the ground level of learning and continuing it throughout successive years will provide students with the foundation that they will need to be successful readers.

"Take time to read... it is the foundation of wisdom."

-Anonymous

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APPENDIX A

MORRIS INVENTORY SPELLING TEST

SPELLING LIST

ă	a	BACK	Please scratch my back.	46
ĭ	e	SINK	We wash dishes in the sink.	
ā	a	MAIL	Put the mail in the box.	
ĭ	e	PICKING	The men were picking apples.	
ĕ	a	DRESS	That is a pretty dress.	
ā	a	LAKE	We swim in the lake.	
ī	i	RICE	John likes to eat rice.	
ē	e	PEEKED	The girl peeked in the window.	
ă	a	STAMP	You must put a stamp on the letter.	
ī	i	LIGHT	The box was very light.	
ē	e	SEED	To grow apples, you must plant a seed.	
ă	a	DRAGON	The green dragon breathes fire.	
ĕ	a	BED	The bed is very small.	
ā	a	GATE	Close the gate.	
ĭ	e	STICK	The dog ran after the stick.	
ĕ	a	TEST	We are taking a test.	
ī	i	SIDE	The side of the building was painted.	
ē	e	FEET	The puppy has small feet.	

9 a a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

6 e

3 i

APPENDIX B

ANECDOTAL RECORD

Anecdotal Record

48

Student _____ Grade _____

Date and Activity observed	Book title	Comments
	Miscues	
	Miscues	
	Miscues	
	Miscues	

APPENDIX C

ANECDOTAL RECORD

AND

REMINDER LIST

Anecdotal Record and Reminder List

Name_____ Grade_____ 50

Reminder List	Dated Notes